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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the implementation of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) second language proficiency guidelines in Florida's public schools and colleges includes a brief review of literature about the guidelines, background information on the oral proficiency movement, and a description of the effects of the movement in that state. Major criticisms of the guidelines are outlined. The emergence of the oral proficiency movement in the last decade and the evolution of the guidelines are explained. The integration of the guidelines into some areas of Florida's foreign language curriculum, teaching methodology, and testing at all levels is described, and results of a survey of 15 second language programs concerning implementation of the guidelines are reported. The popularity of oral language competitions in the public schools is noted. It is concluded that the guidelines and the oral proficiency movement have been influential in the state, and will continue to be so despite some initial resistance. (MSE)

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ACTFL PROFICIENCY IMPLEMENTATION IN THE STATE OF FLORIDA

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ACTFL PROFICIENCY IMPLEMENTATION IN THE STATE OF FLORIDA

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This report summarizes the results of a preliminary investigation of the implementation of the ACTFL proficiency guidelines in the State of Florida. The study looks at the impact of the guidelines on teaching methodology, curriculum design and testing procedures. The need for the study is underlined by a call for an active research effort into the effect of the guidelines on the foreign language classroom in "A progress report on the ACTFL proficiency guidelines 1982-86" (Hiple, 1987).

The nature of the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and their usage has been a subject of increasing controversy in our profession. The dialog continues between advocates and critics in forums such as the Modern Language Journal, Foreign Language Annals, and at the ACTFL and TESOL conferences. Advocates of the proficiency movement such as Bragger, Byrnes, Galloway, Medley, Omaggio and Liskin-Gasparro believe that by stressing function, content, and accuracy at levels of instruction, Americans will increase the ability to communicate in real-life contexts. The stated goals of the proficiency movement are to understand other cultures and to become interactionally competent in foreign language settings. Kramsch questions (1987) whether proficiency is synonomous with interactional competence, because of the

emphasis on behavioral functions, lexical and grammatical forms fo the language.

Controversy even exists regarding the definition of proficiency. Schulz (1987) points out that at a 1981 conference on Language Proficiency Assessment, participants could not arrive at a conclusive common definition of proficiency. Burt, Dulay and Hernandez-Chavez identify 64 separate and measurable components of proficiency, while Oller and Perkins define proficiency as a single factor of global language proficiency.

Bachman and Savignon (1987) present another critique of the ACTFL Oral Interview, arguing that many foreign language professionals have unrealistic expectations for the guidelines, that too many believe the guidelines will provide the solution to all classroom problems. They state further that many also feel that the guidelines will be the basis for criterion referenced testing, improved professional standards, and provide a "new blueprint for foreign language curriculum design and teaching methods."

On the positive side, Bachman and Savignon value the guidelines for:

1) the establishment of a standard for defining and measuring language proficiency independent of specific languages and contexts

2) the provision of scores that are comparable across different languages and contexts

3. the setting of new standards of accountability in language teaching that strengthen the profession through ensuring students' ability to use the language after passing courses with

high grades.

Byrnes (1987) describes the major grounds for criticism of the guidelines, including the purported elitism of the construct of proficiency and the oral interview. She counters by declaring that assessment of oral language proficiency is by definition elitist due to the emphasis on grammatical accuracy and the nature of what constitutes and educated native speaker.

Another criticism cited by Byrnes is the oral interview's alleged obsession with grammar, that the divisions between levels of proficiency are actually determined by mastery of specific discrete points of grammar. Byrnes responds by asserting that grammar is only part of one of three areas that the test assesses: language function, context and accuracy.

Background Information on the ACTFL Proficiency Movement

The oral proficiency movement is less than a decade old, yet its impact upon the foreign language profession has been profound. The US government focused attention on the need to develop the oral language proficiency of military and diplomatic personnel after World War II. The Foreign Service Interview was developed in response to the recognition of the need to develop communicative and linguistic competence. Hiple (1987) presents an insightful description of the history of the oral proficiency movement and ACTFL's involvement in it. The impetus for the oral proficiency movement in national education began in 1977 when the Modern Language Association and the American Council of Learned Societies received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for Humanities to create five task forces

whose goal was to propose a unifying mission to the profession. Their recommendations were published in Language Study for the 1980s: Reports of the MLA-ACLS Language Task Forces. The publication of this report coincided with the appointment of the President's Commission of Foreign Language and International Studies which first met in October, 1978. The report of the President's Commission was influenced by the recommendations of the task forces. ACTFL incorporated the suggestions of both reports in a proposal to develop proficiency guidelines entitled A Design for Measuring and Communicating Foreign Language Proficiency. ACTFL's proposal was funded by the US Department of Education in 1981 to develop generic proficiency goals for reading, writing, speaking, listening and culture and language-specific sets of proficiency goals in Spanish, French and German that were based on the generic goals. Oral proficiency assessment became the priority, partly due to the government's emphasis on communicative ability and partly due to the tradition of the oral interview.

ACTFL pursued the development of language proficiency projects and received additional funding from the US Department of Education to offer academic oral proficiency tester training with ETS to assess the proficiency of both students and teachers.

Subsequently ETS won a grant form the government called the Common Yardstick Project whose purpose was to research the possibility of establishing national standards for oral proficiency. ETS endorsed the Foreign Service Interview oral proficiency scale but made two changes for academic use:

1) the combination of the upper levels of the government scale into one broad scale

2) the subdivision of the lower ranges of the scale where most academic language learners cluster

The 1982 ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines reflected an emphasis on oral proficiency. The testing objectives provided curricular direction to foreign language education at all levels, establishing a progressive sequence of realistic expectations. In the State of Florida, the objectives are tied to the Curriculum Frameworks which outline the language skills required by students to function in a variety of contexts. The guidelines help to establish language proficiency achievement goals for the end of each year of study at all levels with special attention to speaking proficiency.

Implementation of ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines in Florida

The ACTFL guidelines have had an impact in some areas of the foreign language curriculum, teaching methodology and testing at all levels in Florida. In curriculum, the State of Florida Curriculum Frameworks for K - 12 grades reflects a proficiency orientation in its communicative and functional goals. The Frameworks incorporate applied language studies in their mention of foreign language for specific purposes courses, a rare occurence in state curriculum planning at the secondary level (Grosse, 1988).

Additionally, the State of Florida conducts statewide foreign language competitions with a large oral component each spring for junior and senior high students of foreign languages.

The competitions feature judging of impromptu speaking (two minutes on a topic chosen at the competition), declamation or recitation, myth telling, talent, skits, plays, costumes, projects, posters and food. Florida's counties have begun to follow the state's lead through the implementation of county-wide language competitions. Dade County Public Schools (fourth largest school district in the US) and Broward County Public Schools (eighth largest school district) held foreign language competitions this year. In some ways the organization of the competitions differ. For example, in Dade County the impromptu speaking topics focus on production of discrete grammatical points, while the Broward County the topics reflect natural communication more. Pinellas County School Board holds a Culture Day in the spring with declamations, impromptu speaking and other activities. Escambia County Public Schools hold a foreign language competition once a year as well. The supervisor of foreign languages for Broward County Public Schools Vilma Diaz comments "What we're striving for is to be able to communicate in the language. You need to have the children compete" (1988). Winners of the county contests attend the statewide competition in the spring.

Like other states, Florida requires a score of 220 on the Test of Spoken English for add-on teacher certification in ESOL, reflecting its recognition of the value of teachers' oral language proficiency. However, no such requirement exists for certification of foreign language teachers. The issue of a required level of oral proficiency for teacher certification in foreign languages is a hotly discussed topic at statewide

gatherings of foreign language professionals. The educators wrestle with the critical need for foreign language teachers and the need to ensure a certain level of proficiency in new teachers. In reality, the shortage of teachers in Florida is acute: state universities of Florida only produce 6% of the foreign language teachers hired in the state each year. This is lower even than the amount of math and science teachers trained by the state university system each year to meet the critical shortage of teachers in these areas.

A telephone survey of fifteen second language program leaders was conducted to discover the extent to which foreign languages around the state have incorporated the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. The following program leaders were contacted:

David Tipmore, Director, Continuing Education Foreign Language Program, University of Miami

Carol Lazzeri, Director, Intensive Language Program, University of Miami

Charlotte Al-Jamal, Director, English Language Institute, Florida International University

Reinaldo Sanchez, Chair, Modern Languages, Florida International University

Frank Ploener, Director, Intensive English Program, Barry University

Osvaldo Lopez, Chair, Foreign Languages, Miami-Dade Community College Wolfson Campus

Crystal Marin, Chair, Foreign Languages, Miami-Dade Community College South Campus

Seymour Pollack, Chair, Foreign Languages, Miami-Dade Community College Interamerican Campus

Wally Lyshkov, Supervisor Foreign Languages, Dade County Public Schools

Vilma Diaz, Supervisor Foreign Languages, Broward County Public Schools

Ana Roca, Coordinator Foreign Languages, Florida International University

Christa Kirby, Foreign Language Supervisor, Pinellas County School Board

Kay Broughton, ESOL Coordinator, Escambia County School District

Ronald Bryant, Foreign Language Supervisor, Orange County School Board.

Ernest Frechette, School of Education, Florida State University

The survey consisted of the following questions:

1. Are your familiar with the ACTFL proficiency guidelines?

2. What is your opinion of them?

3. How useful are the guidelines in your second language program?

4. In what ways does your program implement the guidelines?

5. Does your program conduct oral language tests?

6. What is your opinion of oral tests? How well do they measure language proficiency?

7. Have you or your teachers participated in the ACTFL/ETS

oral proficiency tester training program? When? How many teachers participated?

8. What impact did the training have on your second language program?

Analysis of responses:

Slightly over half of the program leaders were familiar with the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. These respondents felt that the guidelines were particularly useful as targets, or goals for their programs. The foreign language supervisor of Dade County Public Schools remarked that the county's curriculum in foreign languages had a proficiency orientation. Others responded that the guidelines were not used in the actual scoring of oral placement or classroom tests, but that their primary value was in the setting of program goals.

Every program leader responded that oral tests were administered in the second language program to varying degrees. Many noted that the administration of such tests is important but complicated by the fact that they are so time-consuming. The Intensive English Programs tended to use oral tests such as the John test, the Ilyin Oral interview, and self-developed oral interviews as part of the placement procedure. Escambia County uses the Bilingual Syntax Measure and the Idea Proficiency Kit for ESOL program entry and exit requirements. Each public school system leaves the decision to include oral tests up to the individual teacher. Oral tests are used informally by those teachers who choose to administer them. However, In Pinellas County, the foreign language supervisor encourages the classroom use of oral tests through notifying the principals that teacher

evaluations should include checking the teachers' grade books for grades from oral testing. Clearly, the types of oral tests range considerably from teacher to teacher, and no information exists on how frequently such tests are given to the K - 12 students, or how much weight is given to the tests.

At Miami-Dade Community College, the largest community college in the United States that was also rated the number one community college in quality of education, oral exams are an integral part of the foreign language curriculum. First and second year language courses require oral testing throughout the semester and as part of the final exam. At Florida International University and the University of Miami, the administration of oral tests is carried out informally, at the discretion of the classroom teacher.

Almost all of the respondents felt that oral testing provides a good measure of a student's ability to communicate in the second language. Many felt that the oral tests should be used in conjunction with other tests for placement and for classroom assessment.

Spanish, French and ESOL faculty members at Miami-Dade Community College were trained recently in administering the Language Proficiency Interview by ACTFL/ETS. In 1982 twelve K-adult teachers from around the state were trained as testers at Florida International University. Dade County Public Schools also trained 45 teachers through ACTFL's tester training program in Spanish.

In conclusion, the ACTFL guidelines have had some impact on

the overall goals of the curriculum of foreign language programs in Florida. The State of Florida Curriculum Frameworks, the stated "proficiency orientation" of the foreign language curriculum and teaching methodology in the individual counties, all point to the embracing of the ACTFL guidelines. County foreign language supervisors cite a commitment to a proficiency-based curriculum and teaching approach. Yet change in teaching methodology and even texts is slow to come. The difficulties of administering and scoring oral tests and teacher resistance present further obstacles to teacher adaptation of a proficiency orientation.

The Advanced Placement examinations in Spanish and French have a taped section that require students to make a recording of their speech in response to a question.

The popularity of oral language competitions in the public schools throughout Florida is spreading from county to county. Oral language tests are used commonly for ESOL program entry and exit, and sporadically in the foreign language and ESOL classroom. The kind of tests, frequency of administration, and weight of test vary enormously.

The oral proficiency movement is only six years old, and has just begun to affect the second language curriculum, methods of teaching and testing. In Florida, approximately half of the sixteen program leaders contacted had not heard of the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. Some leaders in the state strongly resist the use of oral language tests as being impractical to administer and score. Yet it seems likely that the impact of the ACTFL guidelines on curriculum development, materials adaptation,

teaching and testing methods will continue to develop as more teachers grow comfortable with oral testing techniques, as programs adopt new texts that reflect the proficiency orientation, more teachers receive training in giving and scoring the ACTFL oral interview, and more programs require levels of proficiency for entry and exit requirements,

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